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Mrs Foster and the rebels: Irish unionist approaches to the Easter Rising, 1916-2016¹

I

At the beginning of 2016 the then First Minister of Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party's (D.U.P.) Arlene Foster, declined to attend the centenary commemorations for the Easter Rising in Dublin. Mrs Foster subsequently relented slightly. She remained clear, however, that she would not be associated with any 1916 event which could be construed as anything other than interrogative.

The year 1916 has been long and conventionally viewed in the historiography as a critical divide in the story of modern Ireland with the different Irish communities looking to different episodes, the Easter Rising and the Somme, in terms of the formation of their respective national and state identities. It is, of course, true that since the 1980s, and in particular since the cease-fires (1994) and Good Friday Agreement (1998) in Northern Ireland, this binary has become much less oppressive. The First World War has been rediscovered by the Irish state and nation, and though the Somme certainly retains a particularly unionist cultural inflection, other killing fields such as Messines (where the Irish peace tower has stood since 1998) have emerged as shared commemorative spaces, and indeed as symbols of reconciliation. But, while some tacit agreement has been reached between the peoples of Ireland on the issues of killing, or being killed by, Germans in the early twentieth century, their mutual slaughter remains much more difficult territory. Though the Easter Rising has been revisited and to a considerable extent redefined for each Irish generation, and though in 2016 the embrace of the commemorations was widened as never before, northern unionism has remained

¹ Early versions of this paper were delivered to audiences at Churchill College, Cambridge, the University of Westminster and Boston College in March and April 2016. A later draft was delivered as the Learned Society of Wales lecture at the University of Aberystwyth's 1916 event in September 2016. I am most grateful to Eugenio Biagini, Patrick Smylie, Oliver Rafferty S.J., and Paul O'Leary for their invitations and comments.

profoundly unconvinced.

Does unionist hostility accurately reflect a marmoreal historical verity? Does the depiction of uniformly hostile responses, a default position in the historiography, fully capture the nuances of the available evidence? Part of the purpose of this essay is to revisit the relationship between unionists and 1916 over the *longue durée*, and to argue that this has sometimes been more ambiguous and layered than the First Minister's stand in 2016, and other recent reactions, generally suggest.

There was certainly not much ambiguity or stratification in Mrs Foster's case. Interviewed by the *Impartial Reporter* newspaper in Fermanagh, she was very clear that she saw no moral (or any other) equivalence between the Irish sacrifice on the Western Front and the Irish sacrifice in Dublin on Easter Week. Furthermore, she continued, the Rising was by definition an armed attack on 'the state to which I owe my allegiance'.² Her view, of course, chimes with the wider unionist position that the Irish sacrifice in the First World War was part of a morally elevated global struggle. In this – Fosterian – reading, the insurgents were, in contrast, 'egotistical' and 'had no democratic backing': they saw the war largely in terms of instrumentality and opportunity.³

But, while accepting the clear predominance of this critique in 2016 and in earlier years, it is also important to understand that in fact different Unionists at different times viewed Easter 1916 in perceptibly different ways. This reflection seeks to establish the main features of the unionist narrative of the 1916 Rising, as well as the central themes of eye-witness and other accounts: it examines the ways in which unionist commentators tried to interpret the Rising through gradually evolving types of wider contextualization. It sets out evidence pointing to some rarely observed personal and intellectual affinities between unionists and rebels in 1916. At root, this article seeks to explore the relationship between unionism and Irish identity.

² Rodney Edwards, 'Arlene Foster: I won't be associated with 1916 Easter Rising Events', *Impartial Reporter*, 7 Jan 2016.

³ Rodney Edwards, '1916 Rising leaders were "egotists", Arlene Foster says', *Irish Times*, 31 March 2016

At present it does not seem likely that the Rising (despite the wide embrace of the Proclamation and the diversity of the casualties during Easter week and the sensitively handled calibrated official commemoration in 2016) will provide any easy basis for agreement, in the way that the killing fields of the Western Front have come to do. But this is very far from saying that Mrs Foster's intellectual and political inheritance offers only an adamantine negativity.

II

The Unionist narrative of 1916 was swiftly established through the party press, with publications such as the *Weekly Irish Times Sinn Féin Handbook* or (to a lesser extent) the *Irish Life Record of the Irish Rebellion* playing an important role. These identified a distinctive narrative which laid emphases on the ultimate British military victory, as well as on episodes such as the killing of the Dublin Metropolitan Police (D.M.P.) Constable James O'Brien at the gates of Dublin Castle, the ambushing of the 'Gorgeous wrecks' volunteer corps in Mount Street, and the killing of George Playfair at the Magazine Fort, Phoenix Park. In addition to this there were numerous civilians who either kept diaries of the event, in some cases publishing these, or who otherwise commented on the events of Easter week in the years immediately afterwards: Fearghal McGarry has rightly emphasized that one of the distinguishing features of this narrative genre was that (for a variety of social reasons) it was disproportionately unionist.⁴ Its contributors included well known Dublin figures like the Trinity College luminary, John Joly, the high court judge, John Ross, and the Dublin-based Ulsterman, St John Ervine. Provincial perspectives were offered by the Antrim schoolmaster, Robert Robson, and by the poet, 'Moira O'Neill' (Nesta Skrine), resident in Wexford in 1916, but possessing strong associations with Antrim and Kildare.

More substantial contemporary, or near-contemporary. contributions, were offered, for

⁴ Fearghal McGarry, *The Rising: Ireland 1916*, (Oxford 2016), p.202

example, by the Dublin-born *Irish Times* journalist, Warre Bradley Wells ('by birth and breeding a high Tory'), together with a friend, the pseudonymous 'N. Marlowe' (in fact the protestant cultural nationalist, Joseph Maunsel Hone), in their instant *History of the Irish rebellion of 1916*⁵ - a work which confessedly dwelt on the 'mechanisms' of the Rising, seeking to understand its origins and drivers.⁶ A more tendentious and foundational document was perhaps Walter Alison Phillips' 1923 *Revolution in Ireland 1906-23* which influenced a succession of subsequent unionist commentators and memoirists, including Henry Maxwell and St John Ervine.⁷ Phillips was an English-born European historian, who embraced Irish unionism, and who (though remembered now principally for his dyspeptic narrative of the revolution) in fact contextualized Irish events within the wider continental European arena which was his scholarly anchorage (he wrote at length on, in particular, the Congress system and on Austro-Hungary).⁸ Henry Maxwell (whose *Ulster was right* (1934) was produced with the cooperation of the Unionist party) subsequently set out an influential series of arguments addressing the accusation that the unionist militancy of 1912 had delivered both German as well as separatist aggression in 1914 and 1916.⁹ St John Ervine (1883-1971) emerged as one of the high priests of literary unionism through his biography of *Craigavon: Ulsterman* (1949).¹⁰ This, however, was only after a highly complex political maturation, which took him from his familial loyalism through Fabianism and cultural nationalism, and from the backstreets of east Belfast through the Pooteresque world of insurance clerking to the Abbey theatre and the western front and then back to the metropolitan literary world.¹¹ A key figure in terms of unionist apologetics, Ervine's relationship with the 1916 Rising was always characterized by the most intense personal engagement as well as complexity.

⁵ Warre B. Wells and N Marlowe, *A history of the Irish rebellion of 1916* (Dublin, 1916)

⁶ Warre B. Wells, *An Irish apologia: some thoughts on Anglo-Irish relations and the war* (Dublin, 1917) pp. 5, 60.

⁷ Walter Alison Phillips, *The revolution in Ireland* (London, 1923).

⁸ See for instance, Walter Alison Phillips, *Modern Europe, 1815-99* (London, 1903).

⁹ Henry Maxwell, *Ulster was right* (London, 1934).

¹⁰ St John Greer Ervine, *Craigavon: Ulsterman* (London, 1949).

¹¹ Patrick Maume, 'Ervine, St John Greer', in James McGuire and James Quinn (ed), *Dictionary of Irish biography* (Cambridge, 2009). (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a2943>). Among Ervine's other notable works were *Four Irish plays* (Dublin, 1914); *Changing winds* (Dublin, 1917); *Parnell*, popular edition (London, 1928).

III

But of course there was a social, spatial and temporal spectrum of unionist reaction, ranging from the local and immediate through to the kinds of more scholarly reflection essayed by Alison Phillips. It is possible to systematize these reactions in different ways, identifying possible distinctions between northern and Dublin unionist comment, the variegated responses of political leaders, the changing parameters of contextualization as well as (even) the evidence of some tentative affinity between unionists and rebels. But, the essential issue is, in effect, that the varieties of unionism produced a variety of responses.

Given the geographical confines of the Rising, Ulster unionist eye-witness accounts are relatively unusual. However, the professedly ‘Presbyterian and Unionist’ schoolmaster from Doagh, County Antrim, R.B. Robson found himself passing through Dublin during Easter Week – en route to the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation annual conference in Cork. His autobiography of 1935 recounts his experiences in eventually escaping back to Belfast, and is defined very much as an adventure tale (‘I was involuntarily concerned in some very exciting incidents’.)¹² His narrative, however, emphasizes both the touristic – or voyeuristic – aspects of the Rising, as well as the chivalrous behavior of the few rebels whom he directly encountered (Easter Rising tourism is in fact an underreported theme, but recurs in the literature – including in Mrs Hamilton Norway’s published letters (Norway 1916, p.67)¹³. There is an international dimension: though imperial troops were used against the insurgents (including in the defence of Trinity), Robson’s account strongly suggests that some rebels drew a distinction between these and the regular British army: he recounts the experience of an Australian soldier in uniform who, encountering an armed Volunteer in Sackville Street, was firmly but politely told that he

¹² R.D. Robson, *Autobiography of an Ulster schoolteacher* (Belfast, 1935), p.111.

¹³ Norway Hamilton, *The Sinn Féin rebellion as I saw it* (London, 1916) p. 67.

should return to his hotel.¹⁴ This vignette, incidentally, chimes with the testimony of Dublin unionists, who spoke of the determined courtesy of the insurgents whom they encountered.

The poet Moira O'Neill also had some northern anchorage, and indeed made her name through her collections of verse on the glens of Antrim.¹⁵ But she had connections throughout Ireland and the empire, and in 1916 she and her family (including her 12 year old daughter, who later gained fame writing as M.J.Farrell and Molly Keane) were resident at Ballyrankin, Wexford; from there O'Neill contributed a coruscating narrative of the local insurgency to *Blackwood's Magazine*. There is little by way of ambiguity in her essay, which bristles with anger and outrage: the insurgent leaders 'cannot feel disgrace. They reverse every principle of civic decency and their glory is their shame'¹⁶ (O'Neill 1916, p.819). Where other unionist observers often tended to reflect poignantly on the youth of the insurgents, for O'Neill this was a hallmark of irresponsibility: 'any worthless young woman who wanted some excitement put a Red Cross on her sleeve and rushed off with a raiding party taking a revolver as a nursing outfit'.¹⁷ Above all, O'Neill was outraged by the overturning of conventional social hierarchies, and by the new (if temporary) empowering of those whom she despised as 'tramps and tinkers'.¹⁸

But the majority of unionist eye-witness accounts emanate, predictably enough, from Dubliners. One of the most striking themes of the array of work which has been produced from the Bureau of Military History documentation (by, for example, Fearghal McGarry) is the emphasis on the determined normality of some aspects of life in Dublin during Easter Week; and this, as it happens, is also a central theme in the memoirs of Dublin unionists. For these Dubliners, 'normality' is perhaps linked with a determination to be seen to be unfazed by duress, and is connected in turn with some of the conventions

¹⁴ Robson, *Autobiography*, p.113.

¹⁵ Most notably, *Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (Edinburgh and London, 1900) and *More Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (Edinburgh and London, 1921).

¹⁶ Moira O'Neill, [Nesta Skrine], 'During the rebellion in Wexford', *Blackwood's Magazine*, cxcix (June 1916), 819-27, p.819.

¹⁷ O'Neill, 'During the Rebellion in Wexford', p.825.

¹⁸ O'Neill, 'During the Rebellion in Wexford', p.822.

of popular military and colonialist literature. John Ross recorded that the weather of Easter week 1916 was 'like summer' and that he sat in his south Dublin garden 'reading Plutarch ... notwithstanding the sound of machine-guns and cannon'.¹⁹ The conjunction of the unremarkable with the abnormal is a motif of his reminiscences: he recalled, for example, a telephone call from a lady guest at the Shelbourne which was accompanied by the 'weird noise of a machine-gun in the hotel pouring bullets on the insurgents in St Stephen's Green'.²⁰ Godfrey Day, Church of Ireland vicar at St Ann's in central Dublin, 'seemed to be utterly impervious to any sense of danger, and went about as if nothing much were amiss'.²¹ Provost Mahaffy of Trinity, which was a target for the insurgents, walked in his garden 'with perfect quietude of manner', and chirpily told his lunch guests (against the backdrop of gunfire) that 'we are making history'.²² On Tuesday 25 April he acted as returning officer for the University of Dublin constituency, and then nonchalantly supervised a group of junior sophisters who had braved the gunfire to attend an oral examination.²³ Mahaffy's great apprehension in all of this was evidently, not so much the overturning of union and empire, as that Pearse 'aspired to usurp the Provostship of Trinity'.²⁴

A striking aspect of these narratives is often (what might be defined as) a sympathetic ambivalence towards the insurgents. John Joly, an extremely eminent Trinity physicist and geologist, and originally from Queen's County (Offaly), was fired by his brief engagement with military life, and indeed wondered (in the light of all of the excitement) whether his scholarly career had been 'a grand mistake'.²⁵ Like many of the republican insurgents, Joly quickly came to view his military experience in primal or visceral terms: this was not just a matter of catharsis ('I was now a more contented individual than I had been for weeks'), it was also a question of semi-religious comradeship ('I felt as if we

¹⁹ Sir John Ross, *The years of my pilgrimage: random reminiscences* (London, 1924) p.264.

²⁰ Ross, *The years of my pilgrimage*, p.265.

²¹ R.R. Hartford, *Godfrey Day: missionary, pastor and primate* (Dublin, 1940) p.94.

²² W.B. Stanford and R.B. McDowell, *Mahaffy: a biography of an Anglo-Irishman* (London, 1971) p.229.

²³ Stanford and McDowell, *Mahaffy*, p.231; cf Ervine, *Changing winds*, p.545.

²⁴ Warre B. Wells, *Irish indiscretions* (London, 1923) p.110.

²⁵ James Joly, *Reminiscences and anticipations* (Dublin, 1920) pp.223-33.

were back in those apostolic days when men had all things in common') as well as deep moral ambiguity ('I can vouch for the deeply enjoyable nature of looting operations').²⁶ Like other southern unionists, Joly drew a set of distinctions between the rebellion and the rebels, and between the architects of the Rising and its (often young) footsoldiers. Like Moira O'Neill, he was generally struck by the youth of the volunteers, though for Joly this fuelled sadness rather than outrage: he 'reverently' encountered the body of a republican despatch rider who 'looked quite young; one might almost call him a boy. The handsome waxen face was on one side concealed in blood. Poor boy - what crime was his?'.²⁷

Alison Phillips, also writing from a Trinity perspective, applied the distinction between leaders and led in the opposite way, contrasting the chivalric commanders of the Rising with the violence which they had unwittingly unleashed: 'it is not to be supposed that the young idealists who were the nominal leaders of the rebellion all approved of this butchery – at the headquarters in the Post Office British officers were held prisoners and treated kindly enough – but they had unloosed forces which they were unable to control'.²⁸ Warre B. Wells also commended the 'fine courage' of the insurgents, as well as (in general) their 'clean' fighting: 'nor could the rebels in general fairly be accused of rapine'.²⁹ They were rather 'idealist', and (whatever its bloody demerits) 'no echo was heard in the rebellion of old sectarian feuds'.³⁰

Similarly, the septuagenarian Dublin Quaker businessman, Frederic Pim, squarely condemned the Rising, while acknowledging that its (otherwise deeply mistaken) leaders 'were imbued with attractive aspirations and a genuine sentiment of the elevating effects, moral and spiritual, of political independence and republican self-government'.³¹ Once again, their respect for property was singled out for commendation: 'there was no

²⁶ Joly, *Reminiscences*, pp.231-2, 260.

²⁷ Joly, *Reminiscences*, p.235.

²⁸ Phillips, *The revolution in Ireland*, p.99.

²⁹ Wells and Marlowe, *A history of the Irish rebellion of 1916*, pp.150-1.

³⁰ Wells and Marlowe, *A history of the Irish rebellion of 1916*, pp.66-7.

³¹ Frederic W. Pim, *The Sinn Féin rising: a narrative and some reflections* (Dublin, 1916) p.15.

making hay of the furniture and armaments such as would have been done by the German army in a like situation ... they endeavoured throughout to maintain discipline'.³² John Ross, looking back on the Rising from 1923-24, remembered above all the courtesy of those rebels whom he had directly encountered - including those who had occupied his offices in the Four Courts building, but who had left his papers, books and judicial robes largely untouched. Ross, like other middle-class Dubliners, was acquainted with some of the leading insurgents (the intimacy of Dublin society, much-emphasised elsewhere, was not confined by religion or politics); and in particular he was familiar with the work of the three poets, Pearse, MacDonagh and Plunkett, whose execution he explicitly deplored.³³

The interconnection between the insurgents and Germany reinforced the moral ambiguity in the line propagated by (in particular) these southern Unionists. On the one hand unionist journals such as the Dublin-based *Irish Life* were keen to point out the treacherous continental European linkages of both Sir Roger Casement and Joseph Plunkett.³⁴ On the other hand, taken as a whole, 'the leaders were men of a high and fine intelligence of the purest and most unselfish motives with whom love of Ireland, the love of Ireland, the Ireland of Emmet and Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone, of Mitchel and Stephens, ingrained by the teachings of their childhood had been fostered and developed into a passionate devotion comparable only to that of the early Christian saints who sought martyrdom as the most desirable of all things'.³⁵

Moreover, while Dublin unionists and (for a time) Dublin opinion generally was antagonistic towards the rebel 'stab in the back', some of the influences shaping the nationalist perspective were also relevant within unionism. In particular, it should not be assumed that the unionist experience of the crown forces was one of uncomplicated ease. For example, while Francis Sheehy Skeffington and the dead of King Street were by far the most controversial victims of the British campaign, the scurrilous loyalist journalist,

³² Pim, *The Sinn Féin rising*, p.7.

³³ Ross, *The years of my pilgrimage*, pp.270, 269.

³⁴ *Irish Life*, 'Record of the Irish rebellion 1916', p.14

³⁵ *Irish Life*, 'Record of the Irish rebellion 1916', p.12

Thomas Dickson, now largely forgotten, was killed alongside Sheehy Skeffington by Captain J.C. Bowen-Colthurst; and Skeffington's capture occurred when Bowen-Colthurst grenaded and raided the tobacco shop of a Unionist alderman, James Kelly.³⁶ The sometimes peremptory or threatening behaviour of gun-wielding British troops was seen elsewhere as 'true Germanism' by offended Dublin loyalists (just as the behaviour of nervous young British squaddies on the streets of 1970s Belfast also sometimes alienated northern loyalists).³⁷ Even the highly measured Warre B. Wells noted that the crown forces 'seemed to be much more jumpy than their opponents ... [and] to this cause was due most of the excesses which admittedly occurred in connection with the suppression of the fighting'.³⁸

IV

What of the responses of unionist leaders to the Rising? The Ulster unionist politician and polemicist, Ronald McNeill (who was parliamentary private secretary to Edward Carson for a time), emphasized that 'in Ulster the rebellion was propagated with mixed feelings', and identified two obvious main modes of response. There was certainly 'horror at the treacherous blow dealt to the Empire while engaged in a life-and-death struggle with a foreign enemy'; but in addition he highlighted a more complex set of reactions, asking 'was it unpardonably Pharasaic if there was also some self-glorification in the thought that Ulstermen in this respect were not as other men were? There was also a prevalent feeling that after what had occurred they would hear no more of Home Rule, at any rate during the war'.³⁹

For his part, Carson was relatively silent or subdued in the aftermath of the Rising, and Mrs Wilfrid Spender provides a memorable vignette of him in May 1916 bunkered in his Belgravia home at Eaton Place, bombarded with abusive and threatening correspondence,

³⁶ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish Rebellion* (London, 2005) p.193

³⁷ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p.271.

³⁸ Wells, *Irish indiscretions*, pp.63-4.

³⁹ Ronald McNeill, *Ulster's stand for union* (London, 1922) pp.244-45.

and occasionally under physical attack (with bricks through his windows, for example). Shock is well-established as a theme in the literature on responses to the Rising; but silence and evasion (though less recognized) are also important as motifs.⁴⁰

Carson's key preoccupations had shifted after 1914 - so that by 1916 his concerns were not so much national as international – not so much Ireland as the prosecution of the war: his response to the Easter Rising was determined largely by these wider, global, questions. In 1915-16 Carson's parliamentary political base was the Unionist War Committee, a backbench body designed to secure a more energetic prosecution of the war; and indeed it was an issue of global strategy - the protection of Serbia - which had chiefly precipitated Carson from the first coalition government onto the backbenches in September 1915. Ireland at this time was important primarily in so far as it affected the British and Allied war effort.

The progress of his thought is recorded in the pages of Ian Colvin's biography. Echoing his secretary, Ronald McNeill, his 'first thought, when I heard of the rebellion, was "that is the end of Home Rule"'.⁴¹ In addressing the House of Commons on 3 May, after the resignation of Birrell, Carson (thinking perhaps about the emerging suggestion that 1916 in Dublin was rooted in 1912 in Belfast) emphasized that the Rising 'had nothing to do with either of the political parties in Ireland'. As might have been predicted, he called for 'an example which would prevent a revival', but – less predictably – went significantly further than this:

while I think that it is in the best interests of that country that this conspiracy of the Sinn Feiners [sic], which has nothing to do with either of the political parties in Ireland, ought to be put down with courage and determination, and with an example which would prevent a revival, yet it would be a mistake to suppose that any true Irishman calls for vengeance. It will be a matter requiring the greatest wisdom and the greatest coolness, may I say, in dealing with these men, and all that I say to the Executive is, whatever is done, let it not be done in a moment of

⁴⁰ H. Montgomery Hyde, *Carson: the life of Sir Edward Carson* (London, 1953) p.401. See also Adrian and Sally Warwick Haller, *Letters from Dublin, Easter 1916: Alfred Fannin's diary of the Rising* (Dublin, 1995), p.9, where Fannin's 'sustained tone of detachment' is stressed.

⁴¹ Ian Colvin, *Life of Lord Carson* vol. iii (London, 1936), p.162.

temporary excitement, but with due deliberation in regard both to the past and to the future'.⁴²

Later in May this sensitivity was again exposed, when Carson reiterated that the war was the key issue: 'since this dreadful calamity came upon Ireland, I have found great difficulty in restraining my own feelings, as regards the attacks that are daily made and the challenges made daily in the Press. Whenever I feel inclined to answer, I always say to myself, "Remember, there is a war going on which our country is engaged"'.⁴³ In short, a combination of the war, together with a strong sense of strategy and of history, alerted Carson to the political challenges lurking in the immediate aftermath of the Rising - and significantly tempered his responses.

V

How did other early unionist commentators contextualize the 1916 Rising and wider revolution? As has been noted, the most thoughtful and the intellectually most ambitious of the early unionist interpreters of the revolution was Walter Alison Phillips, whose well-known *The Revolution in Ireland, 1906-23* (1923), was cast (as was earlier work) in a variety of subtle continental European contexts. Writing on modern Europe in 1903, Phillips was drawn to comparing Ireland with the Austro-Hungarian empire, observing for example that 'the nationalist movement in Bohemia was at the outset largely due to the antagonism between the Czech laboring classes and the German capitalists as that in Ireland has found its main sustenance in agrarian grievance'.⁴⁴ For Phillips, 1916 and the subsequent insurgency against British rule in Ireland was 'not in its nature local or isolated. It is but part of the revolution which has been in progress to a greater or less degree everywhere – and the lessons it teaches are of universal application. That is one reason why this book bears the title not of 'The Irish Revolution' but of 'The Revolution

⁴² Hansard 5 (Commons), 82, c. 39, 3, May 1916.

⁴³ Colvin, *Life of Lord Carson* vol. iii, p.165.

⁴⁴ Phillips, *Modern Europe*, p.6.

in Ireland'.⁴⁵ 1916 was thus linked of course with German war ambitions, and Phillips scathingly dismissed separatist arguments comparing 'the lot of Ireland under the British unfavourably with that of Belgium or Poland under the Germans'.⁴⁶ The subsequent Irish revolution, in Phillips' calculation, 'gave a unique opportunity for the sinister forces which from their centre in Russia were plotting the dissolution of civilization in every quarter of the globe ... all the materials were to hand for the subtle foreign brains, which were plotting the dissolution of Ireland as a necessary step towards the destruction of Great Britain and the Empire'.⁴⁷ For Phillips the Irish revolution, beginning in 1916, was self-evidently part of a wider international threat to British civilization.

For St John Ervine, on the other hand, who was present in Dublin during Easter Week 1916, who knew some of the protagonists, and who was one of the most prominent unionist commentators on the Rising, the key frameworks for judging the event were ultimately supplied not just by the two World Wars but also by the empire. Ervine himself not only took a global view like Phillips - he was also embedded in various Irish literary and political networks, and was much influenced by Bernard Shaw's Fabian socialism, and by the centrist political positions embraced by the agrarian reformer, Horace Plunkett.

Ervine served in 1917-18 as a junior officer in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, and was badly wounded: he believed for a time that the war effort would serve to unite young Irishmen of unionist and nationalist backgrounds, and believed too that the younger generation could achieve amity where their fathers and mothers had so conspicuously failed. In this sense, the 1916 Rising threatened a key set of his political hopes and aspirations for Irish unity: 'the Easter Rising in Dublin distressed ... all who had hoped that in France the Irish soldiers would form a new union that would utterly surpass the old'.⁴⁸

But, Ervine's most lengthy and explicit statement on the Rising was published in 1949 as

⁴⁵ Phillips, *The revolution in Ireland*, p.xi.

⁴⁶ Phillips, *The revolution in Ireland*, p.114.

⁴⁷ Phillips, *The revolution in Ireland*, p.286.

⁴⁸ Ervine, *Craigavon*, p.311.

a lengthy digression in an otherwise extremely choleric and discursive life of Lord Craigavon; and a key point of reference was the Second World War: 'can comparison be made between Ireland, under the British in 1916, and Poland, or any other occupied country, under the Germans in 1940?'⁴⁹ The answer was of course an emphatic negative - and inspired one of the most highly emotive passages in Ervine's writing: 'let those who feel inclined, like John Dillon, to rave about the suppression [of the Rising] in a "sea of blood", count up the innocent dead in Poland, the innocent dead in Norway, the innocent dead in Holland and Belgium, the innocent dead in Czecho-Slovakia, Yugo-Slavia and Greece, none of whom had wrought the slightest harm to Germany, and then enquire of their consciences if their inclination has any basis in justice or honest belief'.⁵⁰

But, in the end, as for so many Irish and British unionists of the period, a reference point for judging Ireland was supplied to Ervine by the wider Empire, and in particular the Union of South Africa. Successive unionists saw the creation of the Union as a triumph for British imperial statesmanship, and as a demonstration of the reconciliation which was possible in Ireland. For Ervine the British response to the Rising, while comprehensible and proportionate, was – even in his highly embittered state in 1949 - deeply unwise; and 'the way had been shown in South Africa when De Wet's rebellion there was suppressed in 1914' (and when only one execution had taken place). 'Can we not doubt that this was the wise way?'⁵¹

Of course South Africa was also a natural point of comparison for nationalist critics of British government in 1916. Louis Redmond-Howard argued that 'there can be little doubt that if Castle rule had prevailed in Pretoria as it still does in Dublin, South Africa would long since have been a consenting party to German occupation'.⁵² The Catholic Bishop of Limerick contrasted the executions of the leading insurgents in 1916, with the lenient treatment meted out to the Jameson raiders by the Transvaal and British

⁴⁹ Ervine, *Craigavon*, p.316.

⁵⁰ Ervine, *Craigavon*, p.321.

⁵¹ Ervine, *Craigavon*, p.321.

⁵² L.G. Redmond-Howard, *Six days of the Irish republic* (Dublin, 1916), p.53.

governments.⁵³ For a broad section of Irish opinion, then, including even strident Ulster unionists, the qualities of statesmanship which had been displayed in the reconstruction of southern Africa had emphatically not been deployed in Ireland.

VI

Were there ever any sympathies binding the unionist and rebel perspectives? Both Eoin MacNeill (in his well-known *An Claidheamh Soluis* article, 'The North Began' (1913)) as well as Patrick Pearse famously lauded the actions of the unionists in 1913 in creating an armed force in the north of Ireland. Generally, these remarks have been taken to indicate that the Ulster Volunteer Force supplied a model to militant separatists; but their wider significance has not been pursued. It is possible to probe further than hitherto by asking not only how unionists responded to the Easter Rising, but also by posing the seemingly counter-intuitive question - were there wider overlaps between militant separatists and unionists in these years at the beginning of the 20th century?

This might at first look set to be a markedly short discussion. There was, however, a quiet intellectual tradition of unionist engagement with separatism which found expression even (perhaps particularly) in the – for unionists - foundational work of E.A. Freeman and A.V. Dicey. Each of these Oxonians ultimately argued the case for union (Freeman supported Gladstonian home rule for a time), but saw some circumstances in which separation would be the least worst option for Ireland, Britain and the wider Empire. Freeman was one of the key intellectuals strongly critiquing Isaac Butt's proposals in July 1874: in an article 'Federalism and Home Rule' in the *Fortnightly Review* Freeman argued that a federal system might be supported if it tended to greater union, but not if it were a step towards separation: 'I am inclined to think that total separation would be a lesser evil than such a scheme of federation, or whatever it is to be called, as is now proposed'.⁵⁴ A.V. Dicey inherited this distinction, arguing, like Freeman,

⁵³ Redmond-Howard, *Six days*, p.57.

⁵⁴ Quoted in John Kendle, *Ireland and the federal solution: the debate over the United*

that if 'the strict enforcement of ordinary law and strict protection for legal rights' became unworkable in either a union or federal state, 'then, tho with the greatest regret, I shd advocate separation'.⁵⁵

These were emphatically not detached intellectual preferences. Instead, they formed a covert - if exasperated - theme within the discourse of some senior unionists. In March 1908 John Atkinson wrote to Walter Long that 'it is a delusion to suppose that a desire for Imperial Supremacy with Home Rule is a law of the being of the Irish Protestant. If I were a young man, and Home Rule were carried, I'd join Sinn Féin and advocate separation, and a republic with all the power that I possess - not from pique or a sense of wrong, or a feeling of having been deserted or betrayed - that's the English delusion'.⁵⁶ In speaking with Blanche Dugdale (Arthur Balfour's niece) in 1928, Carson denounced what he saw as the dishonesty of the Irish Free State settlement, arguing that 'I think there'd be more decency in a Republic than in this humbug. In fact I'd rather see a republic'.⁵⁷ This strain within unionist political thought may help to explain some of the wider ambiguities of response to 1916: however much they repudiated separatism, for some unionists it was at least intellectually and emotionally comprehensible.

Of course a long-standing part of the analysis of some Home Rulers - such as J.J. Horgan, writing in a *Complete Grammar of Anarchy* (1919) - was precisely the fact that unionists were in reality disloyalists, and that their attachment to the British crown and the wider British connection was in fact utterly tenuous. Horgan dedicated his pamphlet to 'those members of the Unionist party, in and out of the House of Commons, who may wish to find out for themselves whence it is that the Sinn Féin movement in Ireland has drawn its example, and who may have the curiosity to trace to at any rate one of their sources certain symptoms of revolutionary unrest in Great Britain, Egypt and India'.⁵⁸

Kingdom constitution, 1870-1921 (Kingston and Montreal, 1989), p.18.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Kendle, *Ireland and the federal solution*, p.23.

⁵⁶ British Library, Walter Long Papers, Add.Ms.62413: Atkinson to Long, 28 March 1908.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Hyde, *Carson*, p.486.

⁵⁸ J.J. Horgan, *The complete grammar of anarchy* (Dublin, 1919), p.3.

It was not only embittered Redmondites who thought along these lines: some southern unionists, and some unionists in western Ulster also argued that 1916 was effectively born out of the reckless, disloyal and transnational militancy of eastern Ulster in 1912-14. The southern Irish Church of Ireland clergyman, Godfrey Day, was vicar of St Ann's Church in central Dublin during the Rising, and, while he 'deplored' that event, he also saw clearly 'the dragon's teeth that were sown by the gun-running at Larne'.⁵⁹ The Donegal-born Presbyterian lawyer and unionist MP, James Rentoul, wrote that 'there is little doubt that the present condition of affairs all over Ireland [in 1916] is the direct and inevitable outcome of the threats and drilling and arming in Ulster. It is almost incredible that those who held up the police at Larne, cut the telegraph wires, landed German guns at dead of night, publicly dared and defied the British Government, and practically boasted of their "treason", did not foresee the aftermath of "Easter Week" in Dublin ...'.⁶⁰

These were charges which were allied to the more comprehensive Redmondite accusation that 'the Ulster crisis' and the associated threat of civil war helped to encourage German militarism and therefore the onset of war. Indeed, a central set of arguments for many Home Rulers during and after the First World War was that 'Carsonite' militancy, and the threat of civil war in Ireland, had helped to persuade the Germans that the British would be unable to offer full resistance; and that Carson was thus an architect of the apocalyptic slaughter of 1914-18. As Father Robert O'Loughran (a Queenstown priest) wrote in 1918, the British democracy 'realised then, as the world does now, that Carsonism was not only leading to civil war in Ireland, but, worse still, to an European massacre'.⁶¹ O'Loughran developed this analysis in other directions, arguing that Carson's humiliation of the Asquith government before the War had so alienated American opinion that they held off from offering support to the British: 'both Carson's attitude preceding the war, coupled with England's atrocities of Easter Week, 1916, should have utterly disgusted the free and liberty-loving Americans of British hypocrisy and tyranny ... Carsonism kept America two-and-a-half years out of this war of civilisation'.⁶² Equally, 'America might

⁵⁹ Hartford, *Godfrey Day*, p.94.

⁶⁰ J.A. Rentoul, *Stray thoughts and memories* (Dublin, 1921), p.217.

⁶¹ Fr Robert O'Loughran, *Redmond's vindication* (Dublin, 1919) p.3.

⁶² O'Loughran, *Redmond's vindication*, pp.83-4.

have rushed to the Allies' help two year before she did, only for Carsonism'.⁶³ Denis Gwynn, writing somewhat more cautiously in 1932, could still argue that 'much evidence suggests that the German Foreign Office counted upon the menace of civil war in Ulster as the chief reason why England could not interfere', while also acknowledging German interest in the Irish Volunteers.⁶⁴

One of the most eloquent exponents of this analysis was Louis Redmond-Howard. Writing sympathetically on Casement, Redmond-Howard argued that both he and the Irish Unionist leader Edward Carson were bound into a long-standing Irish framework of European reference: 'Sir Edward Carson had introduced a new principle into Irish politics – or was it merely the same as that of Owen Roe O'Neill and Wolfe Tone? ... after intimidating the Nationalists with the fear of the English army, they [Carson and his Unionists] began to intimidate the English army with the fear of the Germans'. Casement, in this sense, was merely inheriting and adapting a set of European engagements prefigured by Carson who in turn was drawing upon more ancient Irish historical precedents.⁶⁵

Of course various unionist apologetics strove to tackle these questions about the relationship between Carsonism and 1916. The most substantial of these was Henry Maxwell's *Ulster was right* (1934) – and it was Maxwell who, writing in the Craigavon era, constructed the most lasting and influential defence of the unionist moral high ground in relation to 1916. He argued (like Redmond-Howard) that 1916 was not created by 1912, but that each had a longer gestation in Irish history: 'to suggest that in Sir Edward Carson's Volunteers there was any new principle unknown to Irishmen or that they in any way opened up fresh possibilities to insurrectionists must surely be a misconception'.⁶⁶ He also argued (with some contemporary justification in fact) that Carson's leadership and robust governance of unionist militancy effectively guaranteed

⁶³ O'Loughran, *Redmond's vindication*, p.179.

⁶⁴ Denis Gwynn, *The life of John Redmond* (Dublin, 1932), p.350.

⁶⁵ L.G. Redmond-Howard, *Sir Roger Casement: a character sketch without prejudice* (Dublin, 1916), pp.22-3, 30

⁶⁶ Henry Maxwell, *Ulster was right* (London,1934), p.156

order rather than the reverse: 'it is all very well to say that the Ulster Volunteers paved the way to the effective disorganisation of disorder ... it must not be forgotten that, but for the [Ulster] Volunteers, it is almost certain that disorders of so serious a nature would have broken out in 1914 that it may very well be that England would not have been able to take the part she did in the Great War'.⁶⁷

Moreover, Maxwell sought to dispose of the Home Rule accusation that unionist militancy had not only delivered Pearse but also Kaiser Bill: 'yet another accusation which is levelled against Carsonism from time to time, is that the paralysis which it threatened to the British Government was the signal for Germany to declare war ... a much better signal would have been the inevitable chaos and ruin which would have resulted throughout all Ireland, but for the inspiration of restraint which Carsonism created directly in the North and by example and imitation in the South'.⁶⁸

In fact contained within Maxwell's vigorous unionist apologetics, especially in terms of its analysis of the role of Carsonism on the eve and in the early years of war, was an implicit acknowledgement of some areas of overlap between demotic unionism and its nationalist counterpart. St John Ervine, a magnificently unsentimental observer of popular unionism in Belfast, identified a strain of scepticism about Carson's rather too efficient delivery of his followers into the ranks of the British army and from thence to the trenches. Similarly, the unionist author Hugh Shearman argued (in 1942) that 'in July 1916 a terrible thing happened ... the Ulster leaders did their best to tide over that crisis with brave words but the lesson of the war sank in. A profound distrust of the British Army and British efficiency and a cynical determination not to be fooled again remained in Ulster minds. It has remained there to this day ...'.⁶⁹

This point is worth emphasizing in terms of the prevailing binary relating to 1916: in the first years of the war, unionists did not automatically celebrate the blood-letting on the

⁶⁷ Maxwell, *Ulster was right*, p.158.

⁶⁸ Maxwell, *Ulster was right*, p.159.

⁶⁹ Hugh Shearman, *Not an inch: a study of Northern Ireland and Lord Craigavon* (London, 1942), p.150.

Western Front, but instead in some cases both recoiled from the slaughter and threatened reaction against their political leadership. Shearman's observation is telling, partly because it comes from a unionist perspective, and partly because he was writing in the midst of the Second World War, when one might have expected a more crudely patriotic default position. In fact it should come as no overwhelming surprise that, just as Irish nationalists were sceptical about their leadership and the war effort, so too were some Irish unionists: moreover, it seems clear that most Irish people, nationalist and unionist, had a healthy desire to stay alive, despite the best efforts of their respective leaders, unionist, Home Rule or republican.

One last area of consideration in terms of possible affinities between unionism and the insurgents rests with the area of class politics – and in particular with the low-key admiration of some unionists for James Connolly (despite the latter's bracing critique of unionism). Bryan Ricco Cooper, a former unionist M.P. and Sligo landowner of increasingly progressive political beliefs, and - like St John Ervine - much affected by the war, wrote of his veneration for Connolly in an unpublished history of 'Ireland under Sinn Féin': 'Conolly [sic] was probably the greatest man whom Ireland has produced in the present generation ... his great soul gave to the Dublin labourer a noble inspiration and a hope of better things'.⁷⁰ Warre B Wells, similarly, devoted a lengthy section of his memoir of the revolutionary years to a highly sympathetic treatment of Connolly.⁷¹

Ervine himself, otherwise suspicious of the Rising, was of course leftist in his politics at the time, being a prominent Fabian. Ervine was also bound to one of the most prominent martyrs of easter week, Francis Sheehy Skeffington, and indeed was walking in his company on 26 April 1916 a few hours before his death at the hands of Captain Bowen-Colthurst. Sheehy-Skeffington was, in Ervine's assessment, 'an honourable and upright man, very cranky indeed, but possessed of moral courage far beyond the majority of men. And he was likeable'.⁷²

⁷⁰ Lennox Robinson, *Bryan Cooper* (London, 1931) p.114.

⁷¹ Wells, *Irish indiscretions*, pp.165-71.

⁷² Ervine, *Craigavon*, p.319.

Ervine produced portraits of several of the revolutionary leaders in his novel *Changing Winds* (1917). Henry Quinn, the hero of the narrative, much admires the labour leader Mineely, who (as even his surname suggests) is a thinly disguised Connolly: ‘if the employers hadn’t behaved so brutally over the [Dublin] strike, Mineely might have become the solvent of a lot of ill-will in Ireland; but they made a bitter man out of him, and I suppose it is too late now’.⁷³ Quinn is close friends with, and has been taught by, a Gaelic League activist, John Marsh, who turns out in 1916, and is killed in the fighting in O’Connell Street: Quinn laments the apparent futility of Marsh’s actions, while admiring his passion (“by God”, said Henry to himself, “I wish I had the heart to feel what he feels”).⁷⁴ Marsh’s death in battle is defined in exactly the same terms of nobility and futility as the deaths of Quinn’s English friends, Gilbert and Ninian, who had fallen on the Western Front (‘each in his own way had died finely’).⁷⁵ Overall the representation of the Rising is highly ambiguous: incomprehension about the insurgents’ attitude towards death (they ‘have a contempt for death that I can’t understand. I loathe the thought of dying ...’) is mixed with complaints about the dead hand of the older generation of failed politician, some negativity about Catholicism, and a clear admiration for the rebels’ core honesty and selflessness.⁷⁶

VII

What of more recent unionist perspectives on the Rising? David Trimble, writing in 1992 - and before his election as Ulster Unionist leader - devoted a 37 page pamphlet to the the Easter Rebellion. Strikingly, Trimble's parameters - after 70 years of partition and over 20 years of violence in Northern Ireland - were somewhat more constricted than those of Ervine, being more Irish, more local, and less global. His tone was much less emotional, however, and - unusually for a political pamphlet – he drew on the work of a range of

⁷³ Ervine, *Changing winds*, p.405.

⁷⁴ Ervine, *Changing winds*, p.558.

⁷⁵ Ervine, *Changing winds*, p.569.

⁷⁶ By example, Ervine, *Changing winds*, pp. 362, 558; John Wilson Foster, *Irish novels, 1890-1940: new bearings in culture and fiction* (Oxford, 2008), pp.412-13.

scholars, admittedly those who were sometimes critical of aspects of the Rising and its protagonists (Ruth Dudley Edwards on Pearse, David Miller on church and state in early 20th century Ireland, Father Francis Shaw on the meaning of 1916).

Trimble was markedly calm and measured in discussing the events of Easter 1916, and the protagonists of the Rising, reflecting (it has been observed) his amateur passion for military history – but also a longer tradition of restrained or even grudgingly admiring unionist comment on the insurgents' courage.⁷⁷ In any event this was a serious set of reflections, and by no means close-minded: even Martin Mansergh, a highly influential figure within Fianna Fáil in the Haughey, Reynolds and Ahern years, was cautiously impressed.⁷⁸

However, Trimble was also critical of other aspects of the Rising, and his critique has simultaneously summarized and elaborated a particular set of Ulster unionist convictions relating to 1916. Trimble emphasized that the Easter Rising was 'suffused with religious symbolism' to the extent that, unusually for an historic event, the dates of its commemoration follow Easter itself rather than the calendar dates beginning Monday 24 April 1916.⁷⁹ He emphasized, too, that 'the rebellion of 1916 enshrined the concept of the blood sacrifice - that the violent actions of a few could redeem the nation'.⁸⁰ He acknowledged that 'it is perhaps understandable for the citizens of the Irish Republic to see the 1916 Rebellion as an event which changed history and led to the creation of their state. It must, however, be remembered that before 1916 the British government, through the Home Rule bills, had conceded the principle of self-government; all that was now at stake was the range of powers and the geographical extent of the new entity'.⁸¹

⁷⁷ See Thomas Dolan, 'History in the thought of the architects of peace in Northern Ireland: Gerry Adams, John Hume and David Trimble', Ph.D. thesis (Edinburgh University, 2016).

⁷⁸ Martin Mansergh, *The legacy of history for making peace in Ireland* (Cork, 2003), p.23.

⁷⁹ David Trimble, *The Easter rebellion of 1916* (London, 1992), p.1.

⁸⁰ Trimble, *The Easter rebellion*, p.31.

⁸¹ Trimble, *The Easter rebellion*, p.30.

For Trimble, the Rising's legacy was fundamentally problematic, though he was careful to draw a clear distinction between the actions of the 1916 leaders and the wider Fenian tradition which they represented but also partly spurned: 'the legacy of 1916 is anti-democratic, as the rebels considered that they required no mandate - a view contemptuous of democracy and constitutional norms. The tragedy is that this view appeared to be vindicated by events and now appears to legitimise similar action. That this was not necessarily an element in Irish republicanism can be seen from the IRB constitution ...'.⁸²

Moreover, Trimble viewed (what he saw as) the heavy-handed or insensitive commemoration of this 'anti-democratic' legacy as wholly disastrous, especially in terms of Northern Ireland: '1916 had a particular legacy for the North, as the 50th anniversary of the rebellion started the destabilisation of Ulster'⁸³. This is in fact a key point in understanding subsequent unionist approaches: 1916, in this influential exegesis, was not just about the safely distant history of the neighbouring state, it was also interlinked with the contemporary history and experience of Northern Ireland. In 1966 the relatively liberal (if otherwise limited) unionist prime minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill, identified himself with the tradition of comparatively pragmatic and relaxed unionist responses to the 1916 Rising outlined elsewhere in this essay - only to have his tolerance challenged by an enraged populist loyalism, mobilized by Ian Paisley. Just as Paisleyite fundamentalism threatened both O'Neill together with the oxygen and space required for cool and calm reflection in 1966, so too the continuing relevance of the Rising in the North, and the ongoing challenge from irreconcilables, have each limited the options of subsequent unionist leaders. In this sense Trimble – and Foster – are closer to the divisive passions immediately engendered by the Rising than some ostensibly less distant commentators.

But, for Trimble, 1916 was not just about the enflaming of sectarian and political tensions

⁸² Trimble, *The Easter rebellion*, p.33.

⁸³ Roisin Higgins, *Transforming 1916: meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising* (Cork, 2012), pp.1-2. See also Catherine O'Donnell, 'Pragmatism versus unity: the Stormont government and the 1966 Easter commemoration' in Mary Daly and Margaret O'Callaghan, *1916 in 1966: commemorating the Easter rising* (Dublin, 2007), pp.239-71.

in the North, it had also more directly damaging implications both for the Irish state and also, if inferentially, for reconciliation and unity on the island itself: 'the ideology of 1916 obscures Ireland's British heritage, of which the war dead from what we would now call a Nationalist background are but a symbol. That heritage is still pervasive throughout the Republic; but by being unable to acknowledge and accommodate it, Irish Nationalists are doing violence to part of their own heritage and the need to suppress and deny that heritage may help to explain the continuance and virulence of their hatred of things British in general ...'.⁸⁴

At no point in his analysis did Trimble address the arguments, made not just by Home Rulers, but also by some unionists in the south of Ireland and south and west of Ulster that the northern mobilisation in 1912-14 supplied some of the inspiration for the insurgents of 1916 (he mentioned Eoin MacNeill's and Pearse's acknowledgement of the inspiration of the Ulster Volunteers, but did not chose to consider the implications of this). It is also clear that 'the war dead from what we would now call a Nationalist background' have – in the years since Trimble's work on 1916 was completed – been belatedly rediscovered by the Irish state, and more generally by Irish nationalism, and their sacrifice properly recognized. Whether this re-envisioning of Ireland's relationship with the First World War means that, for Trimble, 'the ideology of 1916' has in fact changed either in content or impact is unclear; but it is at least possible to draw this inference from his reasoning.

VIII

The unionist relationship with 1916 was always more complex than current political (and indeed scholarly) portrayals might suggest, including those by Mrs Foster in 2016. There was unquestionably deep and lasting unionist antagonism, and a sense of betrayal in the midst of wartime adversity. On the other hand, rebellion and rebels have often been distinguished within this history of unionist reaction: criticism of the Rising has

⁸⁴ Trimble, *The Easter rebellion*, p.37.

frequently been tempered by respect for the courage and chivalry of its leaders. More generally, there were muted if consistent personal sympathies within the genre, often with James Connolly (the width of Connolly's embrace has been confirmed by renewed interest in his Bangor-born secretary, Winifred Carney of Cumann na mBan, who was married to George McBride, an Orange loyalist, and veteran both of the Ulster Volunteer Force and 36th Ulster Division). Nor should the possibility of a limited degree of ideological engagement or understanding be wholly dismissed: it is, after all, sometimes said (even by unionists themselves) that 'the essential feature of Ulster unionism is that, whatever it is, it is not unionist'.⁸⁵ The unionist framework of reference in judging the Rising has never been static, but has instead shifted from the First to the Second World Wars via the Russian Revolution, and has also involved imperial analogy: there are in fact grounds for seeing that framework as narrowing, in the long aftermath of partition, to Northern Ireland itself, with readings of 1916 which bitterly emphasise 1966 and 1969. These, indeed, are the particular contexts for Mrs Foster's remarks. In short, while there have been some persistent motifs, there has been no single established Irish unionist critique of the Rising.

All this is clearly not the stuff of which peace towers are built. But it might perhaps cause future unionist ministers to pause and reflect on their options when next they receive an invitation to a commemoration of the Rising.

Moreover, as a final thought it is possible even to interrogate – or at any rate to complement – Yeats's famous claim on the back of Cathleen ni Houlihan that his drama had 'sent out certain men the English shot'. Seán Connolly, one of the Abbey Theatre actors, and an officer in the Irish Citizen Army, was killed on Easter Monday 1916 at the Dublin City Hall. Connolly's last performance at the Abbey was in Yeats' Cathleen ni Houlihan, and his final appearance on stage was at Liberty Hall in a patriotic melodrama, 'Under which Flag?'.

St John Ervine's play, 'The Orangeman', produced in 1914, addresses his preoccupation

⁸⁵ Wells, *Irish indiscretions*, p.33

with the inter-generational tensions besetting Ireland, both in terms of Catholic and (in this case) Protestant society. The one act drama depicts John McClurg, an east Belfast loyalist, who is beset with rheumatism and who is unable to sustain his family's tradition of beating the Lambeg drum. His son, Tom, represents a new departure in the life of the family, refuses to take his father's place, and – in a symbolically charged act - ultimately destroys the iconic drum. One of the most aggressively sectarian of the play's characters is Andy Haveron, a man cankered by his attachment to union and empire (as Connolly would have seen it). In the first and subsequent runs of the play, at the Abbey Theatre, beginning in March 1914, Haveron was played by Connolly.

Ervine, the once and future unionist, was manager of the Abbey in 1915-16, and had a famously fraught relationship with the Abbey troop – yet he was almost certainly the last poet and dramatist to see the actor alive.⁸⁶ On Easter Sunday 1916 Ervine watched intently while Connolly had paraded with his company: 'the captain ... was a man I had known slightly, a modest quiet man of honest desires called Sean Connolly ... I nodded to him and he waved his hand to me. The next day he was dead, killed in the street fighting for some ideal that had dominated and bound his mind ...'.⁸⁷

In several senses, then, Ervine sent out 'certain men the English shot'. But so, too, perhaps, did Irish unionism itself.

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⁸⁶ Robert Welch, *The Abbey theatre: form and pressure* (Oxford, 2003) p.70; Fearghal McGarry, *The Abbey rebels of 1916: a lost revolution* (Dublin, 2015)

⁸⁷ Keith Jeffery, *The GPO and the Easter Rising* (Dublin, 2006), p.165